Eminem Protesters Few But Passionate

Gay bashing in rapper's lyrics prompts some at rally to call on gay musicians Melissa Etheridge, George Michael to stand with them.
By archive-Christian-Boone
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LOS ANGELES — The message — Eminem's music is violence, not art — was loud, but the messengers were few Wednesday (February 21) at a rally protesting the multiple Grammy nominee, held just across the street from the site of this year's awards.

It's become a cliché to note that the cameras outnumbered the protesters, but again it was true, as the ranks of the media dwarfed those of the three dozen or so who gathered in the shadow of the Staples Center.

"This is not art. This is violence," said Robin Tyler, a lesbian activist, and one of the few to directly target longtime gay allies Elton John and Madonna, each of whom has spoken out on behalf of Eminem.

"This is what you want your kid to grow up with, Madonna?" Tyler asked. "Where are the gay and lesbian voices of the music community? Where's Melissa Etheridge? Where's George Michael? Your silence is deafening."

Sponsored by gay and women's rights groups, the largest of the former being GLAAD (The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and the latter NOW (National Organization of Women), the demonstration was organized to express outrage over the "legitimization" of Eminem by the Grammys. Speakers made it clear they do not favor censoring the controversial white rapper, although not everyone at the rally was convinced they meant it.

"Eminem is an artist, and what we have to remember is there was a time when gays were being censored," said Ben Rogers, 23, a counter-protester who described himself as a gay Eminem fan and carried a sign that read, "Remember When Gays Were Censored."

"These people are out of touch," Rogers said about the protesters. "How many of them even own a hip-hop record? I mean, I don't agree with all his lyrics, but I think most of what he's saying is a parody."

Rogers' sentiments parallel those of John, who is performing on the Grammy telecast a duet with Eminem on the latter's hit single "Stan."

"I think there is far more humor on the album than many people think," John wrote in Sunday's *Los Angeles Times*. "We live in an age of political correctness where you can't say this or that. I honestly don't think people will go out and start beating and killing people because of this album."

But many of the demonstrators weren't buying that argument.

"Words, especially epithets, matter," said Erik Stegman, 18, a board member of the Gay and Lesbian Student Education Network (GLSEN). "As a gay youth, it feels like a slap in the face that the Grammys are awarding this kind of hate."

To illustrate the point that words do indeed matter, Cathy Renna, news media director of GLAAD, read some e-mails she said were sent to her organization by Eminem fans.

"Fags are freaks of nature" read one. "I hope Eminem f—in kills you fagets on hiz next album" read another. (The misspellings of "faggots" and "his" were those of the e-mail author.)

"These kind of statements are not far off from the lyrics themselves," Renna said. "Explain to me how these people are getting the joke?"

"This is not Lenny Bruce," said Patricia Ireland, NOW president. "This is not even Tupac Shakur. Eminem is not rebelling against authority. He's attacking groups who are the minority. This is vicious, old-fashioned bigotry."

"This is a very tricky issue for me as an artist," said Randi Driscoll, 28, who produced a CD benefiting the Matthew Shepard Foundation and attended Wednesday's rally. She was part of the protest but seemed ambivalent toward its message.

"I also feel that what we say can have an effect on people. It's hard for me, personally, to judge someone else, but it does seem that there are two separate issues here.

"It's one thing to allow a message to be heard, and of course I'm all for free speech," Driscoll continued. "But then it's another thing to reward hate language, and I don't think you can dispute that that's what Eminem's lyrics are."